

October 13, 2024

SLAVERY, EMPLOYMENT, AND PUTTING THE GOSPEL FIRST

1 Timothy 6:1-2a

(14 of 15 in a series through 1 Timothy)

One of the questions I've often been asked leading up to this sermon is, "Are you really going to preach on two verses?" And my answer is, "Of course not. If you'll notice, I'm only preaching half of verse 2." Seriously, there are a few reasons why I decided to focus only on 1 Timothy 6:1-2a for our sermon text this morning. The first of these is that it clearly is a different topic and section from what comes before and after it. Last week we looked at the section just prior (5:17-25), which was about elders. It would have been a bit odd to tack this section onto that one and after covering what it means to honor, discipline, and appoint elders, add, "Oh, and let me say one thing about slavery real quick before I end this sermon." Similarly, when you look at the text following, Paul is clearly changing topics as we get to what he's addressing in 6:2b, seeing that the focus of this chapter is the nature of false teachers who were wreaking havoc at the church in Ephesus. This makes it difficult to pair our text with what comes after. To start a message about slavery and then quickly move on to false teachers would have been challenging and disjointed as well. Therefore, since Paul focuses on this new topic, I wanted to do the same—even if Paul only spends a short amount of time on it.

A second reason why I thought it would be helpful to cover simply these two verses is that it allows us a little more time to frame the discussion of slavery and the Bible. We all know, this is a tricky topic to cover for many reasons, one of which is that believers in our nation pointed to the Bible to justify the practice of slavery that took place in our country prior to the late 1800s. Meanwhile nearly everyone today sees the practice of slavery in our country as an obviously despicable practice. And so we owe ourselves some time to reflect on the Bible's teaching on this topic.

So let's start there, by considering what the Bible has to say about the slavery we experienced in our country. First, slavery in the US in the 18th and 19th century seems to have been founded upon men actually being captured (stolen, kidnapped) from African countries, transported to other areas of the world (like the US), and sold as slaves. So, if you're asking what the Bible says about this practice, the answer is as clear as it could be. The Bible condemns this act of stealing another man, kidnapping, or capturing him—whatever you want to call it. And we need look no further than the very letter we're studying to see that. In 1 Timothy 1:10 Paul condemns "enslavers," which is a word which refers to someone who is guilty of being a kidnapper or slave dealer.¹ Therefore, there really is no room to even speculate that the Bible supports the practice that fueled slavery in our country in the 18th and 19th century.

¹ BDAG, 3rd ed., 76.

Moreover, I think it's fair to say that the Bible gives instructions for believers, that if followed, would have effectively eliminated slavery, even after it had taken root here. Just take Paul's letters alone. In them he commands believers not to become slaves (1 Cor 7:23). He tells anyone who is a slave to get his freedom if possible (1 Cor 7:21). He commands Christian masters to treat slaves as brothers (Philemon) no longer threaten them (Eph 6:9) but to treat them with the respect and love owed a brother. Finally, the Bible condemns racism, showing that we're all created in God's image and worthy of respect, and so enslaving another for racial reasons is obviously condemned. Putting this all together, it's difficult to imagine that believers could read their Bibles faithfully and not eventually bring an end to slavery. Sure, some evangelical believers argued for slavery for a time in this country, just as they once did in support of abortion, but given time and biblical teaching, this would have certainly turned around among evangelicals—again, just as it did with abortion. Therefore, I think we're safe to say that the Bible condemns the very foundational tenets of slavery as practiced in our country and, if obeyed, would have brought an end to it in time, even after slavery had taken root in our nation.

Now, I get that someone could reply that though everything I've said sounds logical, the biblical authors never take the opportunity to call for an overturning of the institution altogether. That's fair, but we've got to consider a few things. First, one reason, I imagine, that the biblical authors didn't explicitly call for an end to slavery is because they were writing to individuals under the rule of the Roman empire, and Rome wasn't a democracy. Therefore, we can't put on them the vision of electing representatives who might pass legislation and the like. That just wasn't their political system and wasn't within their power to change. To exhort the church to put an end to the practice would very well have been to exhort them to do something in society over which they had no control.

Second, the nature of slavery in our country in the 18th and 19th century wasn't the same institution that existed in the Roman empire. I noted this when we looked at a text addressing slavery in Ephesians early this year, but it's worth noting again. In the first century over one third of those in the Roman Empire would have been slaves.² But (as I've noted) it was a good bit different than the slavery experienced here. For one, most of the individuals who found themselves in slavery were in that position as prisoners of war or descendants of prisoners of war. Their people had been conquered by Rome in battle and instead of killing them, they were brought into the empire to serve as slaves. And while that made up a majority of those enslaved, others might be enslaved for economic reasons. They were in debt and instead of going to prison, worked off their debts as slaves. In that particular situation, one might even see a note of grace in it. After all, being able to work and pay your debts is superior to suffering in prison and definitely preferable to being executed.

Now, I will note that some in the Roman Empire were enslaved because they were abandoned at infancy or were captured by slave traders. But we've already noted that the Bible explicitly

² This note and those following about slavery in the Roman Empire come from Clinton Arnold, *Ephesians*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 419-22.

condemns this, so the biblical authors clearly did call for an end to this practice. But it seems that the majority of slaves in the Roman Empire came into slavery not through that means but through being conquered in war or unable to pay one's debts. Moreover, racial factors seemed to play no role as to who was enslaved. Slaves were composed of people from virtually every nation, language, and tribe. Every race would be found among the slave population in the Roman Empire.

Finally, two other factors set apart slavery in the Roman Empire from how we might think of it in our own country. First, many slaves would be able to purchase their freedom. It wasn't uncommon for them to receive a sum of money for their work from their masters which could eventually be used to purchase their freedom. So it wasn't a situation of life-long ownership. Second, slaves could serve in elevated roles in society. They could serve as doctors, teachers, accountants, and in all roles of society. Masters would often pay to train and educate their slaves at a higher level of training and education than they themselves received, thinking that everyone benefits with this investment. In other words, the situation of slavery in first century Rome may well have as many commonalities with employment in our day as it would have with slavery in our country two-plus centuries ago. Now, I'm not saying they're one in the same, but slavery in the Roman Empire has overlap with our practice of employment, just as it has overlap with our practice of slavery.

These realities no doubt help explain why the biblical authors didn't call for a revolt over slavery in that setting but sought instead how to obey Christ within it. And this is also why I think we can take the biblical exhortations to slaves and masters and apply them to us as employees and employers in our own day. Again, I'm not saying they're one in the same, but there is overlap, and I'm confident that if Paul were writing this letter into our setting, instead of addressing slaves—since there are none in our congregation—he would address how we as Christians need to function at our jobs.

But it's not just that I think Paul would speak to us as employees if he were writing to us, I also think this is often a neglected topic in our lives as we consider how to glorify our Lord. Here's what I mean. If I were to ask you what it looks like to live as a believer in this world, I'd get a lot of answers, but I wonder how many of us would mention how we labor in our jobs? My guess is that this might not even make the top ten list for us, when the reality is that around half of our waking hours each day are spent at work. Our jobs make up a huge chunk of what we do throughout our lives. And I think if we pay attention to what Paul said about slaves and how they should function in regard to their masters, we'll be greatly helped in thinking about how we should function as employees toward our employers in a way that will glorify our Lord. Therefore, since none of this morning are slaves or own slaves—thankfully—I'm going to focus our application to this text in terms of how we should labor in our jobs. And I want to say two things here. First, we need to show honor to those who are our superiors in our jobs.

We need to show honor to those who are our superiors in our jobs

It's extremely rare that any of us have jobs where we're not answerable to someone. That is, most of us have bosses or boards to which we answer. We have an individual or individuals who serve as our superiors in the workplace. How should we respond to them? Well, I think we can learn by seeing what Paul says in verse 1: "Let all who are under a yoke as bondservants regard their own masters as worthy of honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled." The short answer is that we're to regard our superiors in the workplace as worthy of honor.

Now, it may not be that Paul is saying that your boss in the workplace *is* worthy of honor but should be *regarded* as worthy of honor. In other words, it may be that your boss is a lousy person, of low character, who treats people poorly. And if he does so and is an unbeliever, you may well feel like you're under a yoke, as Paul writes here, feeling oppressed in your job. And yet Paul instructs us to regard our superiors as worthy of all honor.

If this sounds a bit extreme from Paul, let me assure you it isn't. In Romans 13:7 Paul tells us to pay "respect to whom respect is owed, [and] honor to whom honor is owed." And he says that in context of speaking about the governing authorities who'd tried to take his life and an emperor who would ultimately have him beheaded. So Paul isn't shy about exhorting us to show honor to authorities over us, even when their character is lacking (to say the least). And so we shouldn't be surprised to see it here.

But note specifically why Paul wants us to show honor to our superiors. He tells us that it is "so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled" (v. 1b). You see, Paul's utmost concern in all situations is the honor of God and his gospel. If anything would cause the name of God to be profaned or the gospel to be reviled, Paul wants to war against it. And being a bad employee who professes Christ would certainly lead to that.

Can you imagine if believers got a reputation for being bad employees? That would suggest that our God doesn't care about us working hard, when the reality is that Scripture commands hard work. It would suggest that our God doesn't want our fellow humans to be respected, when the reality is that God commands us to respect those to whom respect is due. Our actions would be lying to the world about who our God is. It would dishonor God's name. This is the same thing Israel did as they sinned and worshiped the God of other nations. The prophets constantly note that they're profaning God's name. That's what we would be doing if we developed a reputation for being lousy workers, perhaps being lazy and not showing honor to those over us.

Similarly, the gospel could be discredited through our laziness or unwillingness to honor those over us. We testify that the gospel is powerful not only to forgive us but to transform us into people who live godly lives. But if we are lazy or disrespectful so that no one wants to employ us, then we're suggesting that the gospel isn't powerful enough to make us desirable employees. But don't we know better? The gospel transforms every aspect of our lives. But that's not the message we're sending if we fail to honor our superiors in the workplace.

Therefore, if you're in a hard work situation with a difficult boss, show him or her respect and work hard. Now, you're fine to go get another job. There's nothing wrong with seeking out a healthier work environment or better job. But as long as you're there, in that difficult situation, show honor and work hard, reminding yourself that this is about more than you. It's about God and his gospel. You're attempting to honor God's name and keep his gospel from being reviled. So that's the first application we have as employees. We must show honor to our superiors in the workplace, which means speaking well of them, being respectful of them, and working hard for them.

But you might be thinking, "My situation is so much better than that, actually. I work for a believer who is gracious to me, kind, not overbearing or threatening, so I don't have to worry about these things. He knows God is glorious and the gospel is true." Well, that is glorious and should result in you praising and thanking God, but it doesn't mean there isn't application for you here as well. In fact, it's similar to what we just saw in v. 1. In v. 2a, Paul shows us that we don't need to take advantage of a believing boss but should work even more diligently for him.

We should not take advantage of believing bosses but work even more diligently for them

Paul writes, "Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brothers; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved" (v. 2a).

You can imagine how this might have worked in the first century. Let's say you're a slave and your master has just come to faith. Now, you see him as you gather with the saints on Sundays. You call one another brother. You love each other. He hears commands from Paul's letters not to threaten slaves but to treat them with love and respect, remembering that he has a master to answer to as well. And so you begin to feel less fear, but in turn, you show a bit less respect and don't work as hard. Paul's response to that is, "God forbid."

Rather, Paul tells us that the believing slave serve "all the better." He should double down, saying, "I'll work even harder and show more respect because the one benefiting from my labors is a godly man who'll use the fruits of my labors for godly ends." Brothers and sisters, that's precisely how we need to think if we work for a believing boss.

More than once in my life, I've thought that life would be better if there weren't such a thing as money. After all, it can grip your heart and lead you to treasure this world more than the world to come. But I was wrong to see money itself as an evil. In reality, money is an opportunity. We can take it and fund the work of ministry, fund gospel outreach, fund churches being planted or becoming healthy, aid a brother in need, and on and on. Money provides each of us—no matter how much of it we have—a glorious opportunity to store up treasure in heaven as we're faithful with it now. Therefore, I'd love to see more and more money flow into the hands of believers, since I know they want to use the resources the Lord gives them for the sake of the gospel and good of the church. In fact, I pray to that end.

But it might feel like—outside of praying for that—we’re powerless to put more money into the hands of believers. I’m not some emperor who can direct money away from those who would support Planned Parenthood or give toward other causes that are evil and into the hands of those who would use their money for the Lord’s purposes. I don’t have that direct power. But I do have another power. In addition to praying to that end, if I work for a believer, I have the opportunity to work hard and help more money flow into his hands. And if his heart has been transformed by Christ, then he’ll want to use that money toward God-honoring ends. Therefore, I should work hard and persevere in that hard work, seeing that I’m directly serving the planting and building up of healthy churches, thus fulfilling the Great Commission.

That’s what Paul is saying here. If we have a believing boss, we should serve all the better, knowing that we’re benefiting those over us who love Jesus and his people and will use their money toward godly ends. So, don’t use your employer’s faith in Christ as an excuse to slack off or be disrespectful. Rather, work even harder and show greater respect, knowing that it is serving the Lord’s purposes in the end.

Nearly one third of our lives may be spent at our jobs and half of our waking hours. It’s a huge portion of our lives. And it’s a huge opportunity for us to seek God’s glory. But what does that look like? It means honoring and working hard for our unbelieving bosses so that they might see our good works and draw their focus toward the Lord. It means giving them a reason to believe the gospel might be something they desperately need as well instead of something to be reviled. And it means that if we’re in a blessed position to work for believers, than instead of slacking off, we show respect and work even harder, knowing that we’re benefitting one who wants to use his resources to honor Christ and his people. So in those days that it’s difficult, press on, knowing that you’re working for more than a paycheck. You’re seeking to honor the one who lived, died, and was raised for us. You’re working for the promotion of his gospel in this world. So let’s thank him now for his goodness toward us as we come to the table. Amen.